



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

*SOME REMARKS
UPON THE
LIFE OF B. R. HAYDON,
Historical Painter.

By Frederick C. Stephens.

FIRST ARTICLE.

THE study of the autobiography of such a man as Haydon cannot be uninteresting to the student who may be anxious to inquire into the past, present, and prospective state of English Art. His position as an artist, and the period of his existence, cause this extraordinary record of the soul of a man who lived and struggled in smoky torment so many years, whose influence upon Art was so palpable, and, above all, who has left us this strange and sad history for our pitying perusal, and it may be earnest warning,—cause, we say, this book to have almost paramount interest among the few of those in which the author, painting himself as he thought he appeared to others, has admitted us into the *camera obscura* of his own mind.

Some remarks upon the life and the man, rather than upon the book, cannot fail, during our progress through this record of four and sixty years, to bring under consideration many matters of supreme interest in Art-history; more especially, as we do not propose only to receive the light which he gives us, but to examine also his works, and those of his earlier contemporaries, and the result of his efforts and sufferings; by which we may hope to get at the root of his errors, when, if we have oftentimes to condemn him, we shall assuredly have more frequently to pity, and not seldom to laud. He stood upon the stormy strait of a narrow sea, when the tide was turning, to which he sought to give direction: with what success his efforts this way met, perhaps we may discover.

The length and extreme interest of the time while Haydon stood before the world, cannot but afford excellent opportunities of tracing the progress of English Art through the great phase of its change; for it surprises us to reflect that, when he first came to London in 1804, Lawrence was still a young man, and, in the year of his death, 1846, Pre-Raphaelitism was preparing to pronounce itself. Such changes may one man's life connect.

We mentioned the earlier contemporaries of our guide; and an account and summary of them will afford a framework for observation of that progress of Art which it will be our chief object to trace. With this view, we will endeavor to conceive the position which Art held in England at the beginning of the century. Firstly, the patronage, or encouragement of Art was strictly in the hands of patrons, rich and few: knowledge of Art did not exist, but instead thereof, a dilettante Walpolism, if we may say so; a snuff-box appraising, gim-crack collecting, strange old-china-admiring rapture; or, opinion in Art was at best led by such men as Payne Knight; whom, by and by, we shall see

Haydon utterly demolishing—though ruining himself thereby. Added to this, these patrons were mightily capricious, as Reynolds found; and Haydon, sorrowfully demonstrative, relates how his kindest of patrons, Sir George Beaumont, refused, with obstinacy, a picture which Haydon, with equal determination, persisted in offering; solely on account of its large size, while he was actually having his own portrait painted of a size still larger!

Thus, generally speaking, were the patrons of the artists; the great original, Reynolds, was dead; having left deep traces of his mind on the field his successors had to cultivate, he gave a tone of mastery and dignity to his work, which, although founded on foreign and old schools, was so manly and noble in its love of color, so clear, decisive, and subtle in rendering of character, as to render his best portraits—for we cannot receive his other works as historical pictures—a worthy study for other times. Historical painting could hardly be said to exist, except in cruel agonies, under the hands of Fuseli. Poor Barry had spent his heart upon the world, and could find no greater encouragement than the bare permission to decorate the meeting-room of the Society of Arts; he finding everything but the actual materials. The first great English designer, Blake, was slowly starving, known to few, and still less appreciated than now. Hogarth belonged to the previous generation, and, besides, was looked upon, as he still is, more as a moralist than a painter. Northcote and Opie were two men whose minds, originally of great power, produced but little now worthy of consideration: the first, harsh and crude, without feeling for color; the second, though masculine, was gross and heavy, unto the verge of coarseness.

The only real artist preceding Haydon, in point of time, was Flaxman, whose wonderful designs possess that peculiar classicism which our education, in spite of after judgment, compels us at least to regard with attention. Without a doubt they were great and full of mind; yet, as we can admit no excellence as truly valuable, unless based on stern regard to Nature, we are led to examine them twice, to discover in what particular they fall short of our idea of perfect works of Art. We see at once a certain conventionality pervades them all, a Greekish feeling is common to the series from Dante, as well as to those from Æschylus and Homer, showing, (though not without a vast amount of genius), a want of universality of power. An example will best illustrate what we mean by conventionality. In the series from Dante, is one entitled "The Proud." They are men (as the author describes them) burdened with enormous stones. This is their punishment, a corporeal one; but they do not bear it as a human being of the ordinary construction would sustain a great weight; no, not one of them: take an instance. The principal figure supports a stone, which, at a rough guess, we should set down as weighing half a ton. He has it well on his back, (though how it is to remain there is a problem); his feet are flat to the ground, his knees close to his crouching chest, his face forward. Now, if any one will put himself into the attitude of this figure, he will find it quite impossible

to be maintained without a total breakdown: and this exceeds Dante's meaning. To bear any great weight thus, the natural and only possible way would be, for the human frame to make as much of an arch of itself as possible, grovelling with hands and knees to the floor, with bowed back. And is not this, too, the more exact idea of the end of those proud ones who had lied to God and man? Observe that there is no escape here with the assertion of ideality, and so forth; Dante's Purgatory is a region, at all events, ruled by such laws as exist amongst ourselves; its ghosts are ghosts, but still ghosts, suffering as corporeal beings; their low, long-drawn groans startle us, and the quiver of their pale faces is palpable to us. This is the spirit of the whole poem, eminently natural, eminently Gothic. There is nothing whatever of what is called Greek or classic.

If our readers will not accept the following law as immutable—that that which is not true cannot, by any sophistication, by any ideality, or by whatever name it may be called, be rendered beautiful—we must beg them to pass this paper as founded on canons of Art which are not theirs, and with which they have no concern. Perhaps the best and most complete way of stating it, is to assert, that the fact of beauty lies in the most perfect fitness to function, that is, in the justest adaptation to purpose—and the perception thereof, in its highest degree, is the acme of human worship of the Creator.

We have made this long digression on purpose, to state at the outset in what spirit we wish to treat of Art. Let us now return to our autobiography.

He states himself to have been born at Plymouth, in January, 1786, one of the many instances of a descent "from one of the oldest families," which was ruined by a lawsuit. It is astounding what a number of people declare themselves in this predicament: it matters not, however, nor, but that he seems to lay much stress on the subject, need it have been noticed. He was put to school under a dawdling, trifling master, who led his pupils to the study of universal knowledge, with a "taste" for Art and Poetry. This, although Haydon complains much of it, seems to be precisely the sort of education to develop the mind of an artist, provided, as in Haydon's case, a course of more severe study succeeds. He relates many anecdotes of his early taste for drawing, such as thousands of others can tell. His juvenile works, the admiration of everybody, brought about the usual result of such ignorant praise: for few think, when praising a boy's sketches, that there is as much difference between such things, and executive art, as there is between a specimen of calligraphy and an epic poem. Haydon resolved to become an artist in spite of father, mother, family, friends, fortune, and, actually, in spite of a weakness of the eyes, which then seemed permanent, and indeed often returned upon him during his life. His relatives, as usual in such cases, wished him to follow his father's trade, of bookseller; and here occurs a most characteristic passage. "Friends were called in; aunts consulted; uncles spoken to; my language was still the same; my detestation of business still unaltered; my resolution, no tortures of the rack could have shaken."

* Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon, Historical Painter, from his autobiography and Journals. Edited and compiled by Tom Taylor, Esq., of the Inner Temple. 8 vols. Longmans: London, 1889.

"Luckily, I had an illness, which, in a few weeks ended in a chronic inflammation of the eyes. For six weeks I was blind, and my family in misery. At last, fancying I could see something glitter, I put out my hand, and struck it against a silver spoon. That was a day of happiness for us all. My mind, always religious, was deeply affected. I recovered my sight, but never perfectly: had another attack; slowly recovered from that, but found that my natural sight was gone, and this, too, with my earnest and deep passion for art. 'What folly! How can you think of becoming a painter? Why you can't see,' was said. 'I can see enough,' was my reply; 'and, see or not see, a painter I'll be; and, if I am a great one without seeing, I shall be the first.' Upon the whole, my family were not displeased I could only see sufficiently for business. I could still keep accounts, and post the cash-books. It would have been quite natural for an ordinary mind to think blindness a sufficient obstacle to the practice of an art, the essence of which seems to consist in perfect sight; but, 'when the divinity doth stir within us, the most ordinary mind is ordinary no longer.

"It is curious to me now, forty years after, to reflect that my dim sight never occurred to me as an obstacle. Not a bit of it; I found I could not shoot as I used to do, but it never struck me that I should not be able to paint."

Shortly after his recovery he "tumbled" upon Reynolds's Discourses; and the part where Sir Joshua, with that thorough English feeling which pervades the orations, asserts a conviction that all men are mentally equal, and that success depends upon industry and energy, so set young Haydon's heart on fire, that the question whether he should be an artist or a tradesman was settled at once.

"He proceeded to study with the fierce earnestness of his nature; and, with the aid of his mother, influenced by his firmness, gains his father's consent and promise of support for a season to study in London. The description of an interview with his mother at this period is so fine in its way, that we cannot forbear extracting it.

"One morning, as I lay awake very early, musing on my future prospects, the door slowly opened, and in crept my dear mother with a look of sleepless anxiety. She sat down by my bedside, and took my hand, and said that my father had blamed her very much for promising that I should go to London: that he had been talking all night to her, and had said that I should have everything I wished, if I would give up my scheme. She added, 'My dear Benjamin, you are our only support; and, in the delicate state of your father's health, God only knows how soon I may be left alone, and unaided. It will break my heart, if, after all my care and anxiety for your infancy, you leave me, just as you are becoming able to comfort and console me.'

"I was deeply affected; but, checking my tears, I told her, in a voice struggling to be calm, that it was no use struggling to dissuade me. I felt impelled by something I could not resist. 'Do not,' said I, 'my dear mother, think me cruel. I can never forget your love and affection; but yet I cannot help it—I must be a painter.' Kissing me on both cheeks, and, with

trembling lips, she said, in a broken voice, 'she did not blame me, she applauded my resolution; but she could not bear to part with me.'

"I then begged her to tell my father that it was useless to harass me with further opposition. She rose, sobbing as if to break her heart, and slowly left my room, borne down with affliction. The instant she was gone, I fell down on my knees, and prayed God to forgive me if I was cruel; but to grant me firmness, purity, and piety, to go on in the right way for success."

He rushed to London—thinking of nothing but "Sir Joshua, Drawing, Dissection, and High Art"—studied with intense enthusiasm fourteen hours a day, laying a good, broad foundation for that quality which he certainly possessed, when he chose to employ it—a noble, learned, and masterly style of drawing—an accomplishment of extreme rarity in those days, as any one may perceive on examining the prints and drawings then produced. After some months of this, he got an introduction to Fuseli; called; was ushered into a gallery of horrors. "I fancied Fuseli himself to be a giant. I heard his footsteps, and saw a little bony hand slide round the edge of the door, followed by a little, white-headed, lion-faced man, in an old flannel dressing-gown, tied round his waist with a piece of rope, and upon his head the bottom of Mrs. Fuseli's work-basket."

Fuseli was then keeper of the Royal Academy; which office (it may be well to explain to American readers) is a post of resident directorship of that institution; its principal duty being to afford instruction to the junior classes of the students. Under his auspices, in 1805, Haydon became a student; and, as always occurs with clever men in such places, soon found himself associating with the *élite* of the schools. Here, we may as well remark, commenced in the Autobiography those admirable and striking descriptions of character and relations of incidents with which these volumes abound, and, indeed, from which they derive no small portion of their interest. We regret that our limits will not admit of many extracts which do not relate to Haydon himself: the mention of a few names must suffice. Jackson, Hilton, Wilkie, Fuseli, Chantrey, Keats, Hazlitt, Scott, Byron, Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth, Wellington, Peel, Melbourne, and, in truth, almost every artist, author, or statesman, not only of England, but almost all the writer's contemporaries of every European country are introduced in this book.

Haydon pursued his studies with an insatiable ardor, getting "nearly a whole subject to himself," for dissection; making drawings therefrom, and the rest of it. Thus he learned what all others should learn from the same source—to understand what he drew, not reducing himself into a mechanical imitator on the one side, or an idle trifle on the other—in his renderings of nature. Wilkie, Haydon's great friend at this period, does not seem to have gone to this extent; but here is an anecdote of his practice.

"When the Academy closed in August, Wilkie followed me down to the door, and invited me to breakfast, saying, in a broad, Scotch accent, 'Whare dy'e stay?' I went to his room rather earlier than the hour

named; and, to my utter astonishment, found Wilkie sitting stark naked on the side of his bed, drawing himself by the aid of the looking-glass! "My God! Wilkie," said I, "where are we to breakfast?" Without any apology, or attention to the important question, he replied, 'It's just capital practice.'

Then follows a remark on Wilkie's picture of "The Fair;" which shows Haydon thoroughly, and how early his self-opinion had begun to influence him.

"But, at this time, I was too big with 'High Art,' to feel its perfection; and had, perhaps, a feeling akin to contempt for a young man of any talent who could stoop himself to such things."

Haydon's notion of High Art insisted upon vast canvases to display itself by; while Wilkie, with the deeper penetration of his character, knew that it was the subject of the picture which interests, with little reference to the size of the canvas. The former's vanity was evidently wide awake at Wilkie's success, and blinded him from seeing the greatness of the effort his friend had made, as well as from recognizing its merits as in a manner the foundation of a new school of art, which sought to produce, through the affection and home-feeling, that effect which he himself desired rather to demand by the representation of what are called great actions; as if those actions which are mostly connected with the misfortunes of the world were more worthy to be dwelt upon than those which we see daily and recognize with our hearts. Wilkie had made a great impression, continually receiving fresh commissions. From him Haydon acknowledges great benefits in instruction, and soon admits that it was through ignorance, and not superior knowledge, that he at first undervalued the young painter's works; but he rushes off again into another mistake, or perhaps he made it a consolation to himself, when referring, as he always did, the actions of others to his own standard; for he says that Wilkie's eye for color was, at this time, "really horrid." This was the era of the "Blind Fiddler." But really any one who can compare their respective works, will perceive that, although Wilkie had not very remarkable success in this quality at any time, yet he was clearly superior to Haydon himself, whose feeling for color generally was something of the crudest order; and as for surface, in which Wilkie excelled, Haydon does not seem to have comprehended it; witness the great patches of color loaded upon both lights and shadows in all his works, for what end we cannot divine.

Through Jackson, who seems to have been wonderfully devoid of selfishness, Haydon received in this year, 1806, his first commission (the subject suggested, that of Dentatus)—from Lord Mulgrave; and this was the first of many acts of kindness which he owed to this most generous of patrons. He thus particularizes the commencement of his first picture. "Joseph and Mary resting on the road to Egypt."—On October 1st, 1806, setting my palette, and taking brush in hand, I knelt down and prayed God to bless my career, to grant me energy, to create a new era in art, to rouse the people and patrons to a just estimate of the moral value of historical painting. I poured forth my gratitude for His kind protection.

during my preparatory studies, and for early directing me in the right way, and implored Him in His mercy to continue that protection which He had hitherto granted me. I arose with that peculiar calm which in me always characterizes such expressions of deep gratitude, and, looking fearlessly at my unblemished canvas, in a spasmodic fury, I dashed down the first touch. I stopped; and said, "now I have begun: never can that last moment be recalled." Another touch—and another, and before noon, I had rubbed in the whole picture. (1) When in came Wilkie. "That's just too dark for rubbing in." "Why?" "Because what can you do darker? Ye must never lose your ground at first." I scraped away until he was satisfied I had restored the ground sufficiently, and got all in like a wash in water-color.

Here, as we are taking him for a guide, we may enter upon a subject respecting which Haydon seems gravely in earnest. At page 50, he says; "Though never vicious, I was always falling in love. No doubt, an Etonian, or a Winchester, or a Rugby boy, or a London dandy, will laugh incredulously at this: but with me it was a fact. At twenty, I had a high and noble object, which sustained me far above contaminations of a 'town life,' and carried me at once into virtuous society, without passing through the ordeal of vice, which young men think so necessary to clear away school-boy shyness, and fit them for the world. Wilkie, I have every reason to believe, was equally virtuous, we both considered our calling a high duty, and we were both anxious to do our best." This nobly expresses what will be the feeling of every man of like aims. 'Times are much changed since 1806; and it is now no longer almost a necessity of a young man's career, that he should plunge into a chaos of debauchery. "And well for art that it is so." For how shall we expect the expression of purity and elevation of feeling from a man who, upon sitting down to his easel, has trespassed upon the divine laws so palpably? How shall we receive a lesson in morality from a man whose blood is still hot with passion, or with wine? or how shall he administer his function of artist (which should be teacher), while he himself is guilty of the sins he would lead us to reprobate, and indeed of still greater, of hypocrisy? For it must come to this; either his teaching is false, or he teaches what he has no faith in. And, which perhaps is more to our purpose, how shall the painter rightly and movingly represent any ennobling subject, when he himself is defiled, and rendered incapable of entering upon its devotion? How can we conceive it possible for a man, the habit of whose life is sensual, to conceive for himself (for instance) the head of the Prophet Amos, whose word from God, respecting Israel was; "and I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazarites. Is it not even thus, O ye children of Israel? saith the Lord. But ye have given the Nazarites wine to drink, and commanded the prophets, saying, Prophesy not."

With the picture above referred to—his first—Haydon seems to have been very successful. He began now to enter into good society, and to be liked, because he "had an antique head." Certainly his appearance later in life partook greatly of the

Roman character. Carrying his head high, he looked you straight in the face, with an air that was rather defiant than otherwise. The whole man bore an impress of pretentious resolution; yet with all this there was something to move respect about him. Above the middle height, even at sixty years of age, he was as erect as at twenty-five; with eyes penetrating, and clear, under a broad and handsome forehead; his firmly-pressed lips, and nostrils narrowed, expressed a mind happy only in exercising his energy. The whole head needed modest gentleness and refinement, yet might well in youth have deserved the compliment which seems to have pleased him so greatly.

Thus closed 1806; 1807 found him resolved to commence his picture for Lord Mulgrave, the famous "Dentatus" picture; which, without regarding it as the work of a young man, not twenty-one years of age, we must consider as without a doubt the first, in point of time, really great historical picture painted by an Englishman; in fact, a work of art almost perfect in all essentials of noble feeling and vigorous subject; while its execution, though not without great faults, still has such beauties, and these the result of such depth of study exercising to the utmost a powerful mind, that we cannot, when considering all these things, but admire, and almost for the length of awarding him that place in art which he missed no opportunity of claiming for himself.

Before actually commencing this great work, he painted in the country a number of portraits, very much against the grain; and he frankly admits them to have been villainously bad. At this period occur the illness and death of his mother; and the account he gives thereof, is so tender, shows such a depth of affection in spite of his willfulness, that all our feelings are stirred in sympathy with him. The whole relation is dramatic to the highest degree, though evidently, without the least attempt at attitudinizing, such as we perceive in him on other occasions. But it is too long for extraction, and too complete and whole to break into fragments.

He returned to London; began the picture; and, as this period of his experience is of immense interest to studying his character, and of not less value in the history of English art; we shall keep close to the side of our companion, and follow him for some distance.

At the very first opening comes this terrible question, "I now re-commenced Dentatus in good earnest; I reflected deeply on the nature of the subject. I felt that the figure of Dentatus must be heroic, and the finest specimen of the species I could invent. But *how* could I produce a figure that should be the finest of its species?"

From Fuseli, I could get nothing but generalization, without basis to generalize upon. He could not explain to me a single principle. I had Nature of course, but if I copied her, my work was mean, and, if I left her, my work was mannered—what was I to do?"

Here we have one of the great questions of Art fairly stated for us. Presuming that there exists no portrait or characteristic description of the person of Dentatus, Haydon seems to have conceived that the proportion of his chief figure, must needs be what is called "heroic," that is, "the finest specimen of the" "species," as an animal,

he could invent. It strikes us as not a little curious that every one starts with an idea that the heroic character must be sustained by an "heroic" body: that is, in the sense of the word, as used in reference to Greek sculpture, a something between mere man and those proportions which the antique rules of Art awarded to the demigods. Yet it is really strange that your military heroes were but rarely so qualified, consider; Tabius, Agesiulus, Alexander, and a score of others, were no giants. We cannot but suppose that there must have been many a slinger in the army of Sesostris, more "heroic" than the Egyptian King; although the historical painters of the period, represented him ten times the size of the common men.

It may be objected that these are not "heroes" of the kind required: that the act of Dentatus was of the strong corporeity, not of the great intellect. But from this arises the other question: if the act was merely thus, why did Haydon spend so much of his mind upon a mere act of physical devotedness? As well when we typify the glory of "the cause" or "order," of which the battle of Waterloo is said to be the crowning act, erect a statue to Shaw the Life-guardsmen, who was, if all accounts be true, undoubtedly the best fighter there; yet such a proposition was never dreamed of: for Englishmen, desirous of typifying the glory aforesaid, pitch upon the late Duke of Wellington, as the "hero of Waterloo," and have erected unnumbered statues to him. When an artist of Haydon's calibre executes a picture of the pretensions of the Dentatus, it seems well worth consideration, whether the subject, in the first case, is precisely the best which could have been chosen? Whether it conveys any edifying lesson which has a value sufficient to compensate for the use of so much skill and talent? It seems to us that in the choice of the subject of this, his great effort, the first and certainly that upon which he spent the prime vigor of his mind, the very blossom of his life, God's most precious earthly gift, Haydon was not so fortunate as he was in many of the later pictures; such as Christ's entry into Jerusalem, The Raising of Lazarus, Nero at the burning of Rome, The Mock Election, etc., etc.

The mention of the modern Theseus, the "hero of Waterloo," recalls the ancient and original one; and it seems not inappropriate to our consideration of Haydon's notion of the heroic ideal, to remark the manners in which the Athenians represented their great champion; him whose heroism was more interesting to them than that of Dentatus is to us. They placed his statue in the pediment of the Temple of their great Patron-Goddess. We do not see him slaying the Minotaur, or doing other deed; the Athenians not requiring to be told of his services to them; but they chose him to be seen receiving his reward—cycathus in hand, conched beside the gods: or else, those hands which are lost, have balanced the long sceptre of a king, and the mutilated visage should seem to be deeply brooding over laws.

With our next article we shall resume our examination of Haydon's process of painting, and progress with "Dentatus."